



South African Communist Party, 5 February 2013

Drop the Concept “Essential Service”

The SACP has witnessed the ongoing debate sparked by the decision of the ANC NEC Lekgotla on the issues of making education an essential service.

Without locking ourselves into a language use debate, after having listened to the debate firstly as participants in the Lekgotla and secondly in subsequent interviews conducted by the ANC leadership, we are of the view as the SACP that in order to keep with the spirit and intent of the proposals the phrase essential service must be dropped in the debate, by both sides. Concepts are not used in abstract in society but are an approximation of reality, as it exists. Unfortunately a concept of essential service in terms of our law and ILO standards means something different. The SACP is aware that in the public service broadly, the current raging debate about education excluded, there has not been a successful conclusion of the negotiations on what services are indeed essential services. This matter has been a thorny subject strike after strike in the public sector and alliance processes to resolve the issues have not borne any fruit.

The latest right wing opportunism of the DA to jump in and support an ANC call and immediately want to extend this to limiting the right of workers in the education sector to strike is just one example of how a discussion can be distorted. The SACP holds the view that declaring teaching an essential service by law would not pass the test.

The SACP however agrees that no one can differ with the need to make education a single and foremost important service in society so that in the manner in which resources are provided we make sure that our children are supported to receive the

best form of education. The SACP is further of the view that we should not just provide an education that produces readily made goods for absorption by the labour market but that our education, an education that must be essential, must be underpinned by the vision of People's Education for People's Power! This vision requires that our schooling and post schooling education systems do not just produce skilled individuals but individuals who are able to interpret and make sense of their political, ideological and socio-economic conditions and thus be actors to radically alter those conditions. The kind of education we must make essential must be a liberating one. This debate is a completely different debate from declaring teaching as an essential service and the two must be kept distinct.

In order for the above dialogue and action in society to be executed we must drop concepts that could just raise emotions at the expense of the issues at hand. The challenges at hand remain huge for us to be bogged down by concepts.

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Here's an idea: let's abolish matric

Dr Michael Rice, The Star, Johannesburg, 4 January 2013

The more things change the more they remain the same. Every year we are presented with a litany of education disasters culminating with the perennial matric exam debacle and attempted cover-up.

Everyone, from the president down has an opinion. However, there is a solution which, though elegant and simple, requires imagination, courage and political will.

The solution to at least one of our education system's seemingly intractable problems is, as I said, both simple and elegant: abolish the matric exam. If this is done all the logistical problems, and anxieties associated with passing and failing will cease. Also, the government could avoid the embarrassment of having its dismal performance compared with that of the independent private schools.

Getting rid of the exam can be justified on educational, economic, administrative and political grounds.

It is widely accepted that a final one-off exam as an assessment of a pupil's competence and scholastic achievement is educationally unsound. How can one exam, after 12 years schooling, provide a just assessment of an individual's worth? The stress that many pupils experience in the run-up to the exam has an undue impact on their ability to perform. And, what is worse, they carry the burden of that performance with them for the rest of their lives.

One of the consequences of our public exam system has been the emergence and proliferation of cram colleges with the emphasis on exam results to the exclusion of everything else. Our obsession with exam results has devalued education to little more than a means of obtaining a certificate to gain entrance to some sort of professional training or a job. The cultivation of values, critical thought, cultural sensitivity and the wide spectrum of opportunities for personal, intellectual and moral development have become irrelevant in the pursuit of marks.

What is needed is a complete revisioning of education; what it is, what it is meant for, who it is meant to serve and how, and how to assess its worth. The abolition of the present public exam system would go a long way to making such a paradigm shift possible.

Our present system was created to meet the needs of the first industrial revolution in the 19th century. It is demonstrably failing to meet the needs of the 21st century. We are living in an era of intense individuality and connectedness. Information, not goods, is our primary means of commerce.

Mass public education was first introduced in Prussia and later the rest of Europe to meet the needs of industrial competitiveness. The second industrial revolution, heralded by Henry Ford's production line, required a similar, though somewhat more skilled, workforce. The third industrial (digital) revolution is changing the world and its inhabitants in ways never before conceived. It is demanding unforeseen skills, new ways of seeing and understanding and being undreamed of a generation ago.

Our present education system and its final exam are at odds with the need to produce the skills and competencies necessary to function and compete in a globally interconnected world.

Regardless of what Umalusi might claim the matric exam has virtually lost all credibility, to say nothing of its *raison d'être*. Nor does the exam have any predictive value.

Certificates are only as valuable as the faith society has in them. It is only the delusional who can believe that a mark of 30 percent or 40 percent is a sufficient warrant a pass from one level of attainment to another. For many years now, universities have discounted matric symbols because they have been such poor predictors of academic success.

The economic justifications for getting rid of matric are perhaps even more telling. The public examination system costs the taxpayer anything between R350 million and R450m a year. In other words the taxpayer is subsidising all those bodies and institutions that rely on certificates for admission to courses or as a sifting mechanism in job recruitment.

Why should the taxpayer have to pay for anyone in the job market or for institutions of higher learning that set minimum requirements? Why should the

taxpayer subsidise the private sector? Anyway, what they are paying for is hardly worth the paper it is written on. And, they know it.

The matric system has long been politicised. In the past, political points were scored by comparing which (language) group scored the most distinctions and which (racial) group produced the worst results. Nowadays race and language have been theoretically removed from the equation. But this does not mean the political element has been laid to rest.

Nor has it stopped the politicians from finding ways of interpreting the results to suit their agendas and prejudices. Racial quotas are being implemented in various forms under various guises that have little to do with education. Provinces are compared, schools are ranked and everyone draws the conclusions they are meant to.

If the exam is abolished there will be less pressure on pupils to bring the system to its knees as they try to avoid facing the inevitable. Much pupil protest is associated with the fear of failure. And it is the fear of failure that fuels cheating, stealing exam papers and the corruption of officials charged with protecting the integrity of the system.

What are the alternatives?

In the medium to long term, the whole notion of what education is, who it is meant for, what it is meant to achieve and how it should be assessed needs to be revisioned in terms of the stark realities on the ground and the demands of the 21st century. A one-size-fits-all curriculum and final exam are no longer tenable.

In the short- to medium-term, institutions of higher learning should set their own entrance examinations. Applicants should pay an examination fee which would be reimbursed if they are accepted. This would eliminate the serious problem of multiple applications by many individuals to a range of institutions in the hope that they will be accepted by one of them. The tertiary sector spends an enormous amount of time and energy sifting through applications every year, the vast majority of which are rejected.

Commerce, industry, and public service departments that require specific educational standards and skills should set and administer their own entrance requirements. It is illogical in this age of specialisation and extreme individualisation to expect one exam to serve the needs of the public service, business, commerce, industry and higher education.

Further, the digitisation of education would individualise immediate assessment and feedback thereby enabling pupils and teachers to calibrate teaching and learning more appropriately. Digitisation allows for greater efficiencies and the timeless updating of information.

It facilitates personalised teaching and learning, enabling teachers and pupils to access appropriate materials. Digital content breaks the barriers of the classroom walls and facilitates interactivity and collaborative learning. Education in many parts of the world, including Africa, is rapidly moving in this direction. South Africa cannot afford to be left behind.

The point is, do we need a baseline public exam (if so what kind?) to ensure that our education system is producing the goods, or should we be exploring more flexible options appropriate for the 21st century? This is where the debate should be situated.

Sticking with the present system is not an option.

It has not produced the results it should have in the past and there is no reason to expect that it will do so in future. Certainly, it serves no real purpose except to raise parents' and pupils' anxiety levels, create opportunities for corruption and generally increase cynicism.

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